

# Implementing the Reading-Writing Connection, Lonna Smith, San Jose State University

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## *Abstract*

Integrated reading-writing instruction is based on the understanding of how the reading and writing processes are connected and how the roles of the reader and writer are interrelated. Student participation in activities that simultaneously promote the development of both reading and writing skills provides effective instruction and enhanced learning.

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For many years, reading and writing researchers (Trosky & Wood, 1982; Tierney, Soter, O'Flahavan, & McGinley, 1989; McGinley, 1992) have acknowledged the importance of the connection between the reading and writing processes. Putnam (1994) asked sixteen respected experts in the field of reading-language arts for their opinions as to what was the single most important piece of knowledge about the teaching and learning of reading known in the 1990s that was not known in the 1960s. She found that the vast majority of the experts mentioned the reading-writing connection and the value of integrated language arts instruction.

Reading and writing are usually described as parallel processes (Trosky & Wood, 1982; Tierney & Pearson, 1983) where the activities of readers are congruent to or mirror images of the activities of writers. Indeed, there is a connectedness between what readers do and what writers do as they prepare to read or write, as they create meaning through text, and as they reflect on the text. For example, in the preparation stage of reading, readers predict content and ask questions as they preview the text. Writers, on the other hand, must choose the content and anticipate readers' questions during the preparation, or prewriting, stage of the writing process. In preparation for reading and writing, both readers and writers set the appropriate physical environment, establish their respective purposes for reading or writing, spark interest, activate prior knowledge, and construct mental images.

After preparing to read or write, readers and writers move into the active stages of the parallel and

complementary processes as they tackle the task of creating meaning through text. Readers continue to ask questions and predict and verify content, and writers provide answers and verification by writing coherently during these active reading and composing stages. Both construct images and meaning, think logically, and react to the ideas being presented. During this stage, writers "talk" to the reader as they compose, and readers carry on a mental "conversation" with the text as they interact with what the writer has created.

After actively reading, the reader checks comprehension and organizes the information learned. These activities are facilitated by the writer who has edited and revised the text so that information is presented in a comprehensible manner. In addition, both reader and writer evaluate the text.

Another way to look at the reading-writing connection is to think about readers and writers. Writers want to give information, share ideas, or provide entertainment. Their means of communication is the text. Readers approach the text seeking information, ideas, or entertainment. Metaphorically, the reader and the writer meet at the text. Each brings his or her experiences to the text, each has the desire to reach the other, and each uses whatever strategies, skills, and knowledge acquired to enable the reader and writer to connect. When both the reader's and the writer's strategies, skills, and knowledge are sufficient, communication takes place. This is satisfying to the writer who knows that ideas and information are being transmitted, and it is equally satisfying to the reader who absorbs, analyzes, interprets, synthesizes, and evaluates these ideas and information.

When reading and writing are recognized as parallel, connected and complementary, and when we understand that the reader and the writer meet at the text, it becomes clear that integrated instruction is possible. It is, in fact, a powerful way for students to understand the reading and the writing processes and to develop skills and strategies in order to become effective readers and writers. After all, because the reader and the writer meet at the text, an understanding of the two processes, and the connectedness between them, can only benefit both.

Surely the connected aspects of the reading and writing processes give strong support to integrating instruction. The concept that writing is a multi-step process involving preparation and reflection, and not just the act of putting words down on paper, can be reinforced by learning about the multi-step process of reading, which also involves preparation and reflection and is not simply the act of decoding words and hoping their meaning becomes clear.

The connection between reading and writing enables the student to adapt skills learned in one area to the other. For example, the understanding of how mood and tone are created is applicable to both reading and writing because the reader who develops strategies for understanding the mood and tone of a reading passage will be able to incorporate mood and tone into his or her writings. And writers who have an awareness of audience and purpose will have those skills needed to determine the author's purpose when they read.

Because there are strong connections between the reading and the writing processes, and because instruction in one will enhance learning in the other, the challenge is to implement the reading-writing connection by integrating instruction (Smith, 1997). Certainly the most common form of integrated instruction is when students increase their knowledge by reading and then use the newly learned information when they write. Reading and writing are also connected when the writer responds to reading (Sarmecanic, 1996). But integrated reading-writing instruction is more than a linear process of using reading to build schemata or writing about what we read. Integrated instruction results from participation in activities that promote the development of both reading and writing skills.

An example of such an activity is "Writing for the Reader" (Smith & Ramonda, 1997). In this activity, students are paired with one student taking the role of Reader, and the other taking the role of Writer. Writer composes a sentence that will begin a paragraph. Reader reads the sentence silently and then poses a question about Writer's sentence. This question, posed aloud to Writer, may ask for additional information about the topic or clarification of what was stated by Writer. Writer then answers Reader's question by adding a sentence immediately following the first one. Reader then reads the new sentence and asks an appropriate question pertaining to it. The activity continues as Writer composes and Reader interacts with the text for several more sentences before exchanging roles and repeating the activity.

To conclude the activity, students should discuss their complementary roles and their responsibilities to each other as readers and writers. They then try their hands at composing, being both the reader who asks questions and the writer who provides answers. This activity reinforces the concept of the reader and the writer meeting at the text with readers who interact with the text by asking appropriate questions, and as writers who anticipate reasonable reader questions as they compose and provide answers. The activity also helps writers develop coherence and provides a cure for writer's block because, in order to keep composing, the writer simply has to ask, and then answer in writing, a question about the previous sentence.

Another activity, "Writing from a Different Perspective" (Smith & Ramonda, 1997), helps both readers and writers develop inferencing skills. Students read a narrative, written in the first person, that describes the relationship between the narrator and another character. Working in groups, students then prepare a list of words and phrases the narrator uses to describe the other character, followed by a list of words and phrases the other character might use to describe himself or herself and the narrator. Students can then compare the lists and explain what clues they used to infer the descriptions written from the perspective of the other character. Then, students either rewrite the narrative from the other character's perspective or compose an autobiographical sketch of the other character, written in the first person.

There are countless other activities that can be used to simultaneously promote the development of both readers and writers. When students compose topic sentences and use them as controlling forces while planning essays, they develop the ability to determine the main ideas of essays. Using the same strategy, students can determine the meanings of figures of speech and incorporate

figurative language into their own writing. Clustering, used to plan writing, can also be a way of reflecting on reading when a cluster is created as a graphic representation of plot or compositional organization. Students grow as readers and writers when they use imaging to understand what they read and to make their writing more descriptive.

The list can go on and on. What is important to remember is that the reading and writing processes have many parallel and complementary aspects that, when taught and practiced together, enhance instruction in both reading and writing. When the writer who has ideas to give and the reader who wants those ideas "walk a mile in each other's shoes," it can only help them to understand the other as they meet at the text.

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